

I am puzzled - supremely puzzled - as to the current proposal offering \$3.89 to the largest, most successful video relay company and \$6.00 to smaller, sometimes less ethical, often less satisfactory relay services. This provides no incentive to the smaller companies to improve their services or hire qualified interpreters, while punishing and pushing out of business more successful entities. This is tantamount to higher performing schools in well-to-do neighborhoods being given more state funding, while economically disadvantaged schools are told they have to improve their services in order to receive that funding, but have no way to do so without the extra funding.

Perhaps the perspective of those we serve will help you realize the impact on the deaf community . . .

When humans appeared thousands of years ago, one of the first things they did was start trying to communicate. From developing spoken language, then written language, sending smoke signals, then runners over long distances, the development of the pony express, to finally the telephone and then the cell phone, humans have always searched for faster and easier ways to communicate.

Not that long ago, I'm sure you remember having to call someone over and over until you caught them at home, because when they were out, you had no way of knowing where they were or of getting in touch with them. Now, you can probably get in touch with most, if not all, of your close family members and friends within the hour, no matter where they are. If they're in a meeting, they can probably sneak a text letting you know they'll call when they get out. Imagine if now, after . . . ten years?, you had to go back to waiting to talk to them when they got home.

My penpal and I waited three weeks for a reply to a letter thirty years ago, between Philadelphia and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Now we text, literally instantaneously, on our cell phones. While we still like to send letters and hold them in our hands, it would be very hard to suddenly not be able to text.

Decades ago, deaf people would watch as hearing people blabbered away on contraptions they held up to their ears. If the deaf person him/herself needed to get in touch with someone on the phone - whether a family member far away to let them know of a birth or a tragedy or a doctor to make an appointment - they had to watch helplessly as a hearing person spoke on that contraption FOR them. They would watch a neighbor talk to THEIR mother, letting them know they had a new grandson, for ten or fifteen minutes, only to hang up and say, "She says congratulations". Well, what was the other nine minutes and 57 seconds about? "Oh, nothing. It wasn't important." Well, maybe it wasn't important to the neighbor, but can you imagine someone having a long conversation with your mother, in front of you, ABOUT you and then telling you it wasn't important? Doctor's offices thought that because a neighbor was calling for the deaf person, it was ok to reveal the deaf person's medical situation to the neighbor. Eventually, a new way was developed for deaf people to make their own phone calls - typing . . . more independent, but very slow and cumbersome. Often, businesses and doctors' offices would say, "This takes too long and I don't have time right now?" and hang up.

For the past five years or so, deaf people have been able to have their OWN conversations, take care of their OWN business, make their OWN appointments, order their OWN pizza, break up with their OWN boyfriend, talk to their family members THEMSELVES and maybe most importantly, MAKE THEIR OWN EMERGENCY CALLS. It has been difficult, at times, to let us, as VI?s - perfect strangers - into their lives and their homes, entrusting us with their social security and credit card numbers, even moreso after smaller, greedier, less scrupulous individuals let their greed overcome their ethics.

If the FCC lowers the rate to a point where the biggest and most successful companies will have to go out of business, where does that leave deaf people? At the mercy of those companies who have the least success providing services . . . subjected to substandard interpreting because those companies have no incentive to do otherwise, since they?re already getting a higher rate . . . having to type their conversations because there?s not enough interpreters or they?re not satisfied with the skills of the interpreters they get? Please don?t do this . . . it will be detrimental, even life threatening, to the entire deaf community. The FCC should be investigating ways to make video relay - the only RELIABLE way for many deaf people to communicate over the phone, since English is not their first language - MORE accessible and MORE equal, not implementing regulations that will reduce service, quality and accessibility. If this is done, thousands of interpreters all over the country will not only be unavailable to interpret for consumers, but will be unemployed in an already troubling economy. If this is done, deaf people will have to revert to services provided by smaller, less successful, less satisfactory (as per deaf consumers) VRS companies or even revert back to using a TTY. This is not, as the law requires, functionally equivalent communication.

Thank you for your consideration and what I hope will be a decision of fairness and integrity.